

The future's bright, the future's online

While print media redundancies continue apace, with the 75 journalists cut at Trinity-Mirror national newspapers just the latest, freelance **David Nicholson** reveals why there has never been a better time to sell journalism online. And he reveals how he turned some shrewd investment in online marketing, along with some good journalism, into more than £100,000 of new work

In the coming years, demand for online journalism will increase dramatically.

This is because an ever larger proportion of business will be online, which will place a growing pressure on companies to invest in search engine optimisation (SEO), which will in turn add to the demand for high quality, well written, up-to-date content.

And who better to provide this content?

From the earliest days of the internet, gaining visibility for your website was crucial to its effectiveness.

If a small sausage maker from Kettering came top of the search engine results for 'sausage maker', they could quickly start to rival Wall's international sales.

The same is true for almost every industry, every website and every search query. Providing compelling content is no longer a luxury that only the most affluent brands can afford, it's an ubiquitous necessity.

As Google stated in a recent SEO guide: "Creating compelling and useful content is likely to influence your website more than any other factor."

It recommends: "Write an original piece of research, break an exciting news story . . . Other sites may lack the resources or expertise to do these things."

Indeed, most sites lack these resources. Unless they have hired journalists or PR consultants who have specialist journalistic skills, they will more likely deliver puff pieces and bland, vanilla, uninspiring content.

Websites like Wikipedia have armies of editors primed to excise any such vanity content. Increasingly, search engines employ the same rationale.

Of course, some PRs are former journalists and can produce great stuff. But I'd argue that it's a small minority: most of them lose objectivity and edge once they cross over.

"Users know good content when they see it and will direct other users to it," states Google in its guide.

They also know PR-based content when they

Top tips for journalists

● **First, you should study SEO criteria in order to understand what search engines are looking for. There is an entire lexicon of tags, keywords, 'strings' and different kinds of links.**

You don't need to understand the technology behind it, but you need to be versed in the language and concept.

● **Second, put up a website of your own. This is now extremely cheap and painless, through companies such as 1&1 Internet Ltd (www.1and1.co.uk), which hosts websites at low cost – less than £10 per month. Then add content using website templates from companies like Drupal (www.drupal.org) many of which are free.**

see it and swiftly click away.

Many of the key issues that websites need to address in order to satisfy search engine criteria are covered by good journalism.

Search engines like frequent updates, so providing newsworthy content is an excellent start: there are good reasons for it being on a website, other than just to attract an SEO ranking.

Well-written articles, reports, news

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stories and features may be re-posted by other websites, creating a link back to the original site.

These links are highly rated by search engines, because they demonstrate a site's popularity.

The better written and more relevant the articles, the more likely they are to be widely shared.

Website visitors like reading useful, relevant and entertaining content: it will bring them back to the site, as they come to regard it as a resource. (A press release on the appointment of a new vice president of sales has less impact.)

As SEO has grown in importance, an industry has emerged to cater for booming demand.

There are now hundreds of companies, in the UK, the States, in India and elsewhere all promising to lift your search engine ranking and deliver fantastic commercial results.

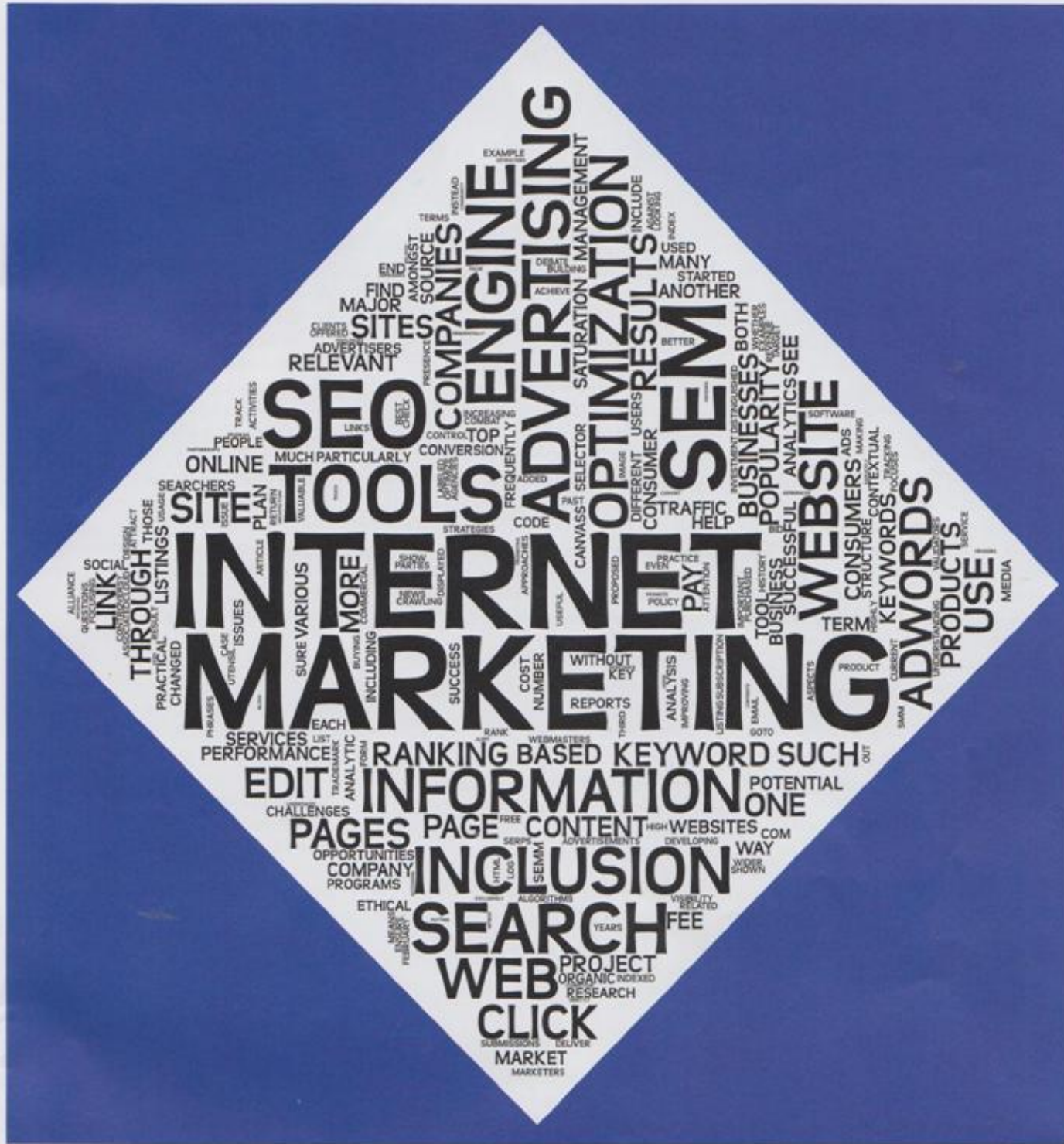
The majority of them employ writers, typically in low cost economies such as India, instructed to pack articles with keywords and phrases.

They then 'seed' these articles on websites whose only function is to host this content, providing links to the target website in order to increase its ranking.

Search engines are already wise to this kind of behaviour. They describe it as 'gaming' the engines or 'black hat' behaviour; they frequently update their algorithms to penalise guilty sites. As search engines become ever more sophisticated, they will be able to detect these deliberate attempts to 'game' them with increasing accuracy.

Here again, the answer lies in good journalism, where articles are produced for a reason, with an authentic readership in mind, rather than purely to satisfy search engines.

The fact that well-written, timely and relevant journalism also appeals to the search engines is the key point. Websites then gain high SEO page rankings for good reason: they are useful and relevant to an online audience.



My website, www.freelancejournalist.co.uk, brings in enquiries from editors and website content managers from all over the world, commissioning me and my colleagues to write articles, reports, news stories and all kinds of other material. We have written for Nokia, Microsoft, Lloyds TSB, Arsenal Football Club and Ernst & Young, to name just a few.

They have generally found us through Googling 'freelance journalist', where we come in the top three or four natural search results.

We spent around £5,000 to optimise the site, but this investment has paid off extremely well,

bringing in more than £100,000 worth of new work. Companies like to see that you have come to grips with SEO yourself, if they're going to hire you to improve their website ranking.

Next, spend time on marketing and promotion. I freely admit that this article is kind of promotional and there are dozens of website directories for journalists and freelancers which accept content from their members. It all helps your search engine ranking and guides users to your site.

Google is right, most companies don't have the resources to create compelling content.

They're too busy making things, selling things, or dealing with the thousand and one tasks that absorb businesspeople every day. Their brains aren't trained or acculturated to produce journalism.

That's why they need us to do it for them.

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freelance journalists contributing to UK and international publications and corporate websites. Contact dn@freelancejournalist.co.uk, tel: 020 7359 1200